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A tribute to Geoff Whitty: a special kind of policy scholar

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It is hard to come to terms with the scale of loss caused by Geoff Whitty's untimely death – a loss that will be felt on many levels – from the academic to the professional to the personal. There is not the space in this brief appreciation to pay tribute to the many ways in which Geoff's work has contributed to the field of education or to my own career and that of many others. This would need to include his landmark analysis of the sociology of school knowledge (Whitty 1985), his enduring commitment to an intellectually-underpinned teacher education (e.g. Furlong et al. 2000; Whitty 2000), and his exemplary leadership of the Institute of Education, University of London. Here I will concentrate on what I see as his main contribution to the field of education policy – a contribution that has been as significant as it will be enduring.

There are different ways of encompassing Geoff's contribution to the field of education policy. One could, for example, catalogue his many significant ESRC-funded investigations of the origins and impact of key interventions, including the Assisted Places Scheme (Edwards et al. 1989); City Technology Colleges (Whitty et al. 1993); the National Curriculum (Whitty et al. 1994); Education Action Zones (Power et al. 2004). Such a catalogue would surely provide incontrovertible evidence of Geoff's position as one of the pre-eminent researchers of policy in post-war England.

Alternatively, one might draw attention to the geographical breadth of his work. This is evident not just in the strong links he enjoyed with education policy researchers in Australia and the USA, but in the richness of his comparative analysis, which covered not only America and Australia, but also Sweden, the Netherlands and New Zealand (e.g. Gordon & Whitty 1997; Whitty & Edwards 1998; Whitty et al. 1998). Such an examination would illustrate the international reach of his work.

However, I want to outline what I see as his principal contribution – which relates not so much to a particular project or text – but more to an approach to the study of policy. I want to argue that Geoff displayed a particular kind of policy scholarship that can be characterised not by the development of a theoretical construct nor a sophisticated methodology – though these aspects are present in all his work – but by a kind of intellectual endeavour that might be summed up in terms of the following principles:

- We need both the detail and the bigger picture
- Policies, politics and politicians matter
- History is important
- Policy scholarship requires precision and consistency
- Policy scholarship should be useful

We need both the detail and the bigger picture

During the 1990s there were a number of calls from within the policy research community that we needed to look at the 'bigger picture'. Those on the left argued strongly that policy research must move beyond isolated studies of individual interventions or micro-studies of classroom practice and focus on the relationship between policies and wider structural properties. Geoff was completely in accord with these arguments – but not to the extent that the detail didn't matter.

On several occasions he used the analogy of the 'vulture's-eye view' to explain the kind of approach he felt we needed – an approach which is 'able to keep the background landscape in view while enlarging its object of immediate interest' (Whitty 1997b: 157). And his parallel focus on specific policies, albeit set against the background landscape, enabled him to see subtle, but significant, differences between policy regimes. He often felt frustrated at the frequency with which education researchers would gloss over these differences and characterise all kinds of reforms as yet more evidence of the ever-expanding reach of neoliberalism.

While he would reject naïve conceptions of education policy that didn't recognise the wider social and cultural context, he did not see policy as merely some rhetorical sleight of hand that disguised a structural and functionalist agenda. Structures, he would argue, do not exist outside the people that continually create and challenge them. The bigger picture is not just 'out there', it is 'in here' (2007b: 157). It is in the intersection of biography and history, of personal trouble and public issue. In that sense his work illustrates the promise of Wright Mills' 'sociological imagination'.

Policies, politics and politicians matter

Because of the recognition that the 'bigger picture' emerges from the intersection of biography and history, Geoff treated policies, politics and politicians seriously. In some ways, this might appear obvious – surely all policy research takes policy seriously? Yes and no. One often gets the impression that the analysis of a policy is less about its specificity and rather more about the researcher's interpretation of how it reflects some overarching structural agenda. Geoff eschewed this approach. It is not that he took policy-makers' claims at 'face value' or failed to interrogate them critically, but rather that he would not simply 'see through' policies or put quite different policies together under the same umbrella.

For Geoff, the specificities of policies really did matter and policies were engaged with on their own terms. And because he was interested in the detail of policies, Geoff was sensitive to shifts in direction and subtle nuances between and within policies. For example, while many saw New Labour as 'more of the same' – simply another manifestation of successive Conservative administrations' marketisation and privatisation reforms – Geoff charted significant differences (e.g. Power & Whitty 1999; Whitty 2008). Unlike many of his peers, Geoff was sympathetic to aspects of the New Labour agenda, and particularly those policies

targeted at reducing educational and social inequalities. However, he also recognised the realities of policy-making – the need to bear in mind electoral logics (Whitty 2006).

For this reason, it is not only policies which he took seriously, but also politicians. Reading his accounts of the changing policy landscape, one is struck by how many individual politicians appear in them. Politicians are presented not as some faceless agents of the ideological state apparatus, but as people dealing with complex and contradictory pressures. In general, Geoff treated all of those in the policy arena in the same way as he treated those in the field of policy research – with a great deal of respect.

The importance of history

Geoff's sensitivity to the more nuanced aspects of policy – and the challenges of electoral logics – were rooted in a recognition of the importance taking the long view. A view that acknowledges both change and continuity – but without privileging either. At times within the field of education policy research, we give the impression that nothing changes. Policies are only chimera that hold out the illusion of change. At other times, we give the impression that policies signal a fundamental swing – usually a sweeping away of those things we hold dear. Geoff rarely made such grand claims, but rather undertook an almost forensic examination of the origins and trajectories of policies. Indeed, the concept of a policy's 'trajectory' was crucial to his approach as it enabled him to follow the complex ways that policies shifted and transformed themselves.

And because of his recognition of the complex interplay between continuity and change, Geoff was also immune to the golden ageism that can be present in many accounts of the last few decades of educational reform. While he certainly saw the negative consequences of Thatcherite reforms, he did not forget the inequalities and injustices that characterised the post-war 'settlement'.

Policy scholarship requires precision and consistency

In his Karl Mannheim Inaugural Address, delivered at the Institute of Education over twenty years ago, Geoff spoke of the challenges of reading Mannheim. Mannheim, he argued, was 'hardly a systematic thinker', but one whose works are 'full of inconsistency and repetition' (Whitty 1997a). The same could not be said of Geoff's work.

Geoff has left us with a body of writing that is systematic and full of internal consistency and coherence. He was scrupulous in his own use of concepts and constructs – meticulous in noting the differences between markets and quasi-markets, between neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, between state control and market forces and in charting how these tensions manifested themselves/were inflected in different policies.

Policy scholarship should be useful

Although Geoff acknowledged the important contribution of post-modernism and post-structuralism to the social sciences, he retained a strong commitment to the 'modernist' project of social research (Whitty 1997b) and, of course, to the modernist project of

education itself. Social research, he strongly believed, should be geared towards addressing social inequalities and injustices.

In general, Geoff was deeply suspicious of polemical representations of policy – not least because they failed to acknowledge the historical and the biographical dimensions of the practice of policy-making. However, while he may have eschewed polemics, that does not mean that he was not politically engaged. His engagement, though, was characterised by persuasion through debate and evidence rather than through rhetoric and confrontation.

He is one of the few policy sociologists I can think of – certainly in the field of education – who constantly strove to engage policy-makers and key stakeholders in meaningful dialogue. As Stephen Ball notes in his Valediction, Geoff was able ‘to move between research arenas and sites of policy with extraordinary ease’. And despite his continued frustration that politicians and policy-makers did not appear to learn the lessons of history or see the negative consequences of their proposed interventions, he nevertheless continued to seek to influence them.

In short, Geoff was a very special kind of scholar. He has left a remarkable legacy – a meticulous, thoughtful, respectful, yet critical, interrogation of education policy. He has also demonstrated the merits of a kind of principled scholarship that the next generation of policy scholars could do worse than to follow.

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